

Dr. (Maj.) Ted Ferguson performs reconstructive surgery on Adrian Puata (far right) to repair his cleft lip. Doctor Ferguson, and members of the plastic surgery team from Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, operated on 30 patients during a medical readiness exercise in Cuenca, Ecuador. This is just one of many exciting opportunities that Air Force medical personnel have the opportunity to be involved with. For more information, go to www.airforce.com/careers/healthcare/careers.php.



Faces of change

photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Having a cleft lip or pallet may not seem like a big deal to the average person, but to those afflicted, it affects the way they talk, eat and look. Especially to teenagers, having a cleft lip or pallet repaired is everything.

So it wasn't surprising when children and adults from throughout the country made a pilgrimage to Cuenca, Ecuador, to receive free treatment from a plastic surgery team deployed from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The team repaired 30 patients' cleft lips and pallets during their two-week stay in July.

"I can affect their lives early on while they're still in school and have an already difficult time relating to their peers," said Maj. (Dr.) Ted Ferguson, a plastic surgeon assigned to Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland.





Eddy seeks the comfort of his father's lap as he and his dad make the three-hour drive to the mountain ranges of Ecuador's interior where they live in a small village.

Sergeant 2nd Class Luis Gerardo Martinez, Ecuadorian Army medical instrumentation specialist (top), looks on as Dr. (Col.) Gary Harishita (kneeling) evaluates Eddy Cedillo Chavez's speech vocalization before performing surgery to repair his cleft lip and pallet. Patients will generally show significant speech improvement after surgery. Dr. (Maj.) McClure Jones (top right), anesthesiologist, keeps records of patients still requiring surgery. Maj. Patricia Bradshaw (middle right) monitors Eddy's post operation recovery. Eddy's operations lasted three hours. Major Bradshaw and Dr. (Capt.) Dale Capener (bottom), hydrate Adrian Puata after his surgery while Ecuadorian students take a break.



Eddy's Story

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

The children of Ecuador have their fair share of problems to deal with on a daily basis, but 7-year-old Eddy Cedillo Chavez has more challenges than most.

It's not the poverty that once bothered him. Or the fact that he has no arms. What really troubled Eddy was his cleft lip and pallet.

Teachers and friends didn't understand him when he talked. When he checked into a military hospital in Ecuador, Air Force plastic surgeons deployed there during a medical readiness exercise asked him to say "baby."

It came out, "Hmm, Hmm." One humming noise high, the other low.

The hole in the roof of his mouth prevented Eddy from forming plosives — sounds produced

by blocking the flow of air through the mouth and nose. He couldn't pronounce the letters p, b, t, d, k and g because air rushed through the hole in his pallet and out his nose. Only his family understood him.

He was also embarrassed when food came out his nose when he ate. "Eddy is good," said Julio-Efrain Cedillo-Arran, Eddy's father, before the operation. "He's not scared. He wants to do it. He wants to be normal. He wants children to treat him normally and play with him."

Eddy's 40-pound structure looked small covered in blue hospital scrubs and wrapped in a white cloth. While waiting for the operation with his 30-year-old father, Eddy remained calm, which was surprising since it would be his third operation. The other two operations done by Ecuadorian doctors weren't successful. Side by side, father and son sat stoically.

Under the knife

Maj. Patricia Bradshaw, a nurse from Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, chatted in Spanish with the two before she prepped Eddy for surgery. She was the team's primary interpreter and controlled the flow of patients in and out of surgery.

She also had the sad job of turning away patients. Before the medical readiness exercise began in mid-July, the plastic surgery team screened 45 Ecuadorians who wanted free operations. The team picked 30. A majority of the patients were children from underprivileged families. However, parents still approached the team daily, children in tow, seeking care.

"It broke my heart when so many people wanted help and we had to turn them away," Major Bradshaw said. "Every time we had to turn them away, a mother was heartbroken."

Dr. (Maj.) Ted Ferguson, a plastic surgeon, estimated Eddy's operation to last an hour and a half. He planned to repair Eddy's pallet. If he had time, he'd repair his lip, as well.

After Dr. (Capt.) Dale Capener, a resident anesthesiologist put Eddy out; the plastic surgery team placed an endo-tracheal tube down Eddy's throat so a machine could breathe for him. Sometimes, the anesthesia will cause a person to quit breathing. And since Eddy has no arms, they had to attach the IV unit to his ankle.

The machine that monitored his oxygen levels beeped every few seconds, blending in with the soft rock playing in the background. In blue scrubs and surgical masks, all that remained visible were the attentive eyes of the team.

On the wall hung a picture of the Virgin del El Cisne, a saint and protector of South American Indians. Ecuadorians are fiercely religious people. About 95 percent of all Ecuadorians are Catholic, influenced heavily by Spanish missionaries in the 16th Century. Before that, the Inca Empire ruled Ecuador.

Once everything was in place, Doctor Ferguson began surgery. During this medical readiness exercise, the two doctors in the team repaired more cleft pallets and lips in 12 days than they do in a year at Wilford Hall.

With intense concentration, Doctor Ferguson sliced into Eddy's pallet. When blood started to flow, surgical technician Master Sgt. Kelly Mathis wiped it away or used a suction hose, or the doctor used a tool that cauterized blood vessels to stop the bleeding.

After having already performed dozens of operations in the 10 days prior to Eddy's operation, the team was at ease. While the doctor and operating technician worked, the two anesthesiologists chatted about heart functions, while others in the room talked about great places to shop. All the while, the machine's steady beeps filled the room. It was all in a day's work.

When Doctor Furguson finished with his young patient's pallet, he decided to fix Eddy's cleft lip as well.

Road to recovery

After three hours, both operations were complete. Eddy was wheeled out into the recovery room. Confused from the anesthesia, Eddy was scared. He moaned, then gently

started to cry. Major Bradshaw stroked his hair and called his name to try and sooth him. In a few minutes, he became his normal, quiet self.

"We waited about 20 minutes so he could clear his mind, then we cleaned him up so that when his father came back to visit him he wouldn't freak out," Major Bradshaw said.

The doctors kept Eddy for observation overnight, and then allowed him to go home the next day. Every time they completed a surgery, they felt great about their mission.

"I create an emotional attachment to all the little children," Doctor Ferguson said. "It's more rewarding because I can affect their lives early on, while they're still in school and have an already difficult time relating to their peers."

It was time to take Eddy home to the Andes Mountains north of Cuenca. His adobe and cinder block home is located above the clouds. There are no vehicles in the village — just horses, cows and chickens.

Holding Eddy in his arms on the way home, Mr. Cedillo-Arran was happy with the operation. He said Eddy awoke with no pain. He could also hear a vast improvement in his speech. Although doctors corrected his defects, Eddy will still have to visit a speech therapist to unlearn his former speech patterns, and then re-learn to speak properly.

But that's all he wanted all along.
To be normal. To be accepted. To be understood. 🐦

Julio-Efrain Cedillo-Arran feeds his son, Eddy (far right), breakfast before leaving the hospital for their home that rests nearly two miles high, above the clouds that skirt Ecuador's famous mountains (below). Eddy and his brother (right) are reunited at home where they enjoy Eddy's favorite sport — soccer.

